



Bald eagle

Haliaeetus leucocephalus

STATUS

Threatened (60 FR 36010, July 12, 1995)

Proposal to delist (64 FR 36453, July 6, 1999)

The bald eagle was reclassified from endangered to threatened status because of recovery progress in 1995. A proposal to remove the bald eagle from the Endangered Species List was published in the Federal Register on July 6, 1999.

DESCRIPTION

Mature bald eagles are a striking sight, with white head and tail against a dark brown body, piercing yellow eyes, large hooked beak and razor-sharp talons. Our national symbol, the bald eagle boasts a 6-to-7-foot wingspan, and can weigh up to 14 pounds. Eagles are opportunistic predators, often using high tree perches to capture fish and waterfowl. As life-mates, bald eagles build large nests for their young and share in the incubation of eggs and care of their young. Eagle nests are amazing feats of nature — as the birds add material yearly, they can grow to immense proportions — some may be as large as 10 feet across and weigh over 2,000 pounds. Eggs are incubated for 45 days and in about eight weeks, young fledge from the nest. Eagles migrate in winter, and roost and hunt in groups along waterways that do not freeze and have abundant food supplies. Bald eagles are known to live 30 years or longer.

HISTORY

Historically, bald eagles occurred throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico in large numbers. As many as 75,000 bald eagles may have flourished in 1782 when the bird was adopted as the Nation's symbol. By the early 1960s, there were fewer than 450 nesting pairs in the lower 48 states.

DISTRIBUTION

The first statewide nesting survey, conducted in 1979, found only 11 nesting pairs in Idaho. By 1998, population numbers rebounded to about 93 nesting pairs, with 96 young reaching fledging age. About 700 to 900 eagles winter along the Clearwater, Kootenai and Snake River systems and on the large Idaho panhandle lakes. Today, more than 5,700 pairs of bald eagles are active in the lower 48 states and another 40,000 pairs are found in Alaska and Canada.

WHAT HAS THREATENED THIS SPECIES?

Trappers, collectors, and bounty hunters took their toll on bald eagles, but their numbers plummeted with the introduction of the pesticide DDT. Eagles' prey contained DDT residues, which weakened eggshells and caused reproductive failures, nesting failures and direct bird mortality. Lead poisoning, often a result of feeding on waterfowl containing lead shot, also threatened the eagle. Habitat loss continues to be a threat to the recovery of bald eagle.

WHAT IS BEING DONE TO HELP RECOVER THIS SPECIES?

The 1972 ban on DDT significantly helped eagle recovery, though some problems still exist with illegal and foreign use of pesticides. Lead shot has been phased out, which helps to control lead poisoning. Recovery progress is tracked through breeding pair and winter bird/roost surveys and nest monitoring. Nesting areas (both existing and potential), as well as wintering habitat and food sources, must continue to be protected for complete recovery to occur.

REFERENCES

USFWS. 1986, Pacific Bald Eagle Recovery Plan.

IDFG and USFWS. 1998, Idaho Bald Eagle Nesting Report

